

These days more and more Maltese Family Doctors are using information technology in their practices. Electronic medical records offer many advantages over paper-based systems, including fast and efficient data retrieval and professional presentation of patient data as problem lists and medication lists. This has been the experience of many colleagues who chose to use the program Transhis for their clinical records, and this has the added advantage that data is classified with ICPC and can be used for research purposes. More details were given in the article about the project published in the June issue of the Journal.

Other colleagues use electronic information systems to assist them in providing optimal care for their patients. Sources include the vast on-line databases available, many times for free, on the internet. One may get accurate and very much up-to-date information, but the vast expanse of information makes retrieval complicated for the uninitiated. Also, one has to be online to use these resources, and this may be impractical for doctors practicing from clinics in pharmacies. An alternative approach is to use data collected on a CD-ROM which can be used by the doctor with access to a computer or laptop in his clinic, without the need for an internet connection. The data on CDs designed for Family Doctors is specific to the discipline and presented in a way which is more efficient to use in front of a patient. However, updates are necessary to keep the information current, and the user must make the effort to keep his system updated.

In this short article I would like to review a few such CD ROMs, and hopefully whet the reader's appetite and encourage him to try the programs out himself.

EVIDENCE-BASED MEDICINE GUIDELINES

Participants at the recent World Organisation of Family Doctors (WONCA) conference in Vienna were given a copy of the EBM Guidelines CD ROM published by the Finnish Duodecim Medical Publications Ltd. The CD ROM collects and summarises sets of guidelines which relate to the core clinical knowledge essential in general practice. It is the most extensive collection of guidelines for primary care, with more than 900 headings, and includes problem-based guidelines relating to a number of symptoms encountered in primary care, as well as disease-specific guidelines including even rare diseases. Various techniques and minor surgical procedures are included,

and all guidelines are supported by concise summaries of the underlying scientific evidence. The evidence is based on Cochrane reviews and DARE abstracts on the Cochrane Library as well as on other recent systematic reviews.

The idea of the project emerged in 1987 from the obvious need for a handbook discussing the diagnosis and treatment of the wide range of diseases and conditions encountered by the Family Doctor. The CD ROM is prepared by a team of experienced, practicing primary care physicians working in close co-operation with 20 specialist co-ordinators and 300 authors. The contents are updated three times a year.

The interface is a simple form, where one enters simple text terms such as "asthma" or "hypertension" and the program returns a list of articles and guidelines with the word in the title or in the actual text of the article as specified by the user. The user can construct advanced searches with logical operators such as AND and OR. The program includes a thesaurus function, a hierarchical MeSH of terms and the facility to browse the database, all included to help constructing searches.

The guidelines are designed to be used at the bedside, and help the physician to choose the best course of action in the evaluation of symptoms and treatment of diseases, according to the best available scientific evidence.

There is no doubt that this CD ROM is a very useful addition to the desktop, and its simple interface makes it so easy and intuitive to use. The guidelines are short and focus on practical points, and can be read quickly during the consultation. A nice feature is the inclusion of pictures of common and less common conditions which help to refresh one's memory in case of doubt.

For more information, the reader should go to the website, at www.ebm-guidelines.com

MENTOR PLUS

Mentor Plus, from Oxford University Press, is a leading diagnostic aid for medical professionals. The CD ROM provides instant access to expert information on over 2,000 diseases and 26,000 commonly used medical terms. It includes text from the acclaimed Oxford Handbooks of Clinical Medicine and Clinical Specialities, multimedia material to support descriptions of diseases and procedures, and can link

directly to the Oxford Textbook of Medicine and British National Formulary CD ROMs. It also incorporates over 200 patient leaflets and details of over 500 self-help groups in the UK.

The interface is based on Microsoft's Internet Explorer, and all documents are indexed and hyperlinked, which makes it familiar to those used to browsing the internet. At the left of the Explorer window is a navigation bar which allows users to skip between sections. The articles are indexed by speciality (e.g. anaesthesia, ENT, general practice), alphabetically by title, and by drugs, making it very easy to find information via a few mouse clicks. Multimedia files (audio, video and pictures) are indexed alphabetically and by media type.

A very useful feature of the program is the collection of patient information sources. These include simple anatomical diagrams to help in educating patients, charts (such as a menstrual diary and peak flow diary), lists of self-help groups, and patient leaflets to be printed out and handed to patients.

In summary, Mentor Plus is an extensive collection of data sources, including patient information

leaflets, which has been indexed for easy and efficient use during the consultation. For more information, the reader should access the Oxford University Press website at www.oup.co.uk

REFERENCE CDS

Many other CDs are available commercially, and may be useful to the Family Doctor. For example, the entire Illustrated Merck Manual is available on CD, along with The Merck Manual of Geriatrics. The text is useful as a reference, and the search functions are much superior to the index of the printed version. In fact you can search the entire manual for single terms. Another well known resource is the Cochrane Library, which spans two CD ROMs. The database is a collection of reliable evidence of the effects of health care, and original research is graded as to the strength of evidence and indexed for searching purposes.

Readers with an interest in acquiring these and similar CDs are advised to contact the editor for more information.